

GOFF'S LEADERSHIP IN STATE POLITICS

Primary Cause of West Virginia Being Republican All These Many Years.

[By Charles Brooks Smith.]

WASHINGTON, Nov. 19.—Continuing in that reminiscent pathway we struck in the article which preceded this one, which told of how it came about that the now Senator Nathan Goff was twice offered and as many times declined to enter McKinley's cabinet as attorney general, let us revert to that memorable campaign of 1888 when Goff headed the state ticket, was elected governor by 200 votes, and was counted out by a legislature which was controlled by the Democratic party by a majority on joint ballot of one vote, which was later increased by ousting one or two more duly elected Republicans.

But for that thin difference between the two parties, how wonderfully different the political history of West Virginia might have been. It is a subject of fine fertility for the imagination of those who are fond of figuring out in their own minds how things might have happened had they happened otherwise than the way they did happen. If we here submit something as a starter for those addicted to this particular kind of retrospection, we consider our faithful Underwood, taxed for a good purpose in transcribing this reminiscence to the tissue enroute to the type.

In the year 1888 the wise old patriots and fathers of the Republican party in West Virginia figured the time had arrived to put their best foot forward to win the state government away from the Democrats who had been holding it for a good many years. Conditions and decreasing Democratic majorities from year to year seemed to justify their opinion. By getting the very best men all along the line to stand as candidates for the various offices from top to bottom of the ticket that year, they figured they could "put it over." So they began early to seek the candidates, the kind of men they had decided they needed for their ambitious scheme for their party's redemption. And it wasn't any easy matter.

In those discouraging minority days, the nominations sought the men and not the men sought the nominations. While that was true of the Republican party, it wasn't true of the Democratic party. In that party it was a fight and a frolic over the nominations, because when they were gotten, it was merely a question of what the size of the Democratic majority would be. Of course, these majorities had been gradually decreasing, but the Democrats wrongly attributed this to factional troubles, which they considered temporary and would right themselves apparently not figuring on a gradual and progressive change in the political opinion of the state due to a rapidly increasing population, which came from the large Republican states of Pennsylvania and Ohio, for the most part.

Control of the legislature was the dominant idea of the plan. It was held to be the key, at that time, for could it be secured the legislative, judicial and congressional districts could be changed from favoring the Democratic party to favoring the Republican party. In short, the Republicans wanted to do a little gerrymandering of their own. Their opponents had been doing it for quite a number of years, and it must be admitted that they did the job fine and dandy for themselves whenever they felt the party's needs required it, which feeling assailed them not infrequently.

"Now to find the man to head the ticket—one of extraordinary and superior attainments and personality who would make a popular appeal to the masses. He must have the picturesque qualities of the hero the eloquence and personal magnetism of the popular orator of that hour, by birth and attainments he must appeal both to the old-time aristocracy and the sturdy, blunt and independent mountain democracy. He had to be a fairly many-sided and exceptional man to fit the stiff requirements laid down by these Republican blaze-trailers in a forest pretty dense and dispiriting with Democratic shadows and entanglements. But that was the kind of a man, and only that kind they figured that had a chance to be the central figure in a fight with a host of other good men on the ticket with him; but who would have less conspicuous parts to play. The candidate for the main office in those days, as it is in these times but not nearly so much so, was the star performer. He had to bear the brunt of the battle. It was almost altogether up to him to put the enthusiasm into the campaign (they call it the "pep" now). If they voted for him, they would vote for straight down the line to justice of the peace. They didn't do much scratching in those days.

One would quite naturally think that they would have had a hard time finding just the kind of a man they wanted that year to run for governor. It would be hard to find him even now when there is deemed to be such an improvement in the male species generally. But they didn't have. He was right there close at hand—a prophet not without honor in his own country.

Nathan Goff had had a war record which made him a heroic figure. He was an aristocrat by birth, and a democrat in belief and in practice. He was magnetic and eloquent—no greater nor more popular orator has West Virginia ever had. He had been a district attorney. He had three times been elected to the House of Representatives, which showed what inroads he could make in the Democratic strength, for he couldn't have been elected had he not received hundreds and hundreds of the votes of the members of that dominant party. He had been a member of the President's cabinet—the first West Virginian up until that time to be so highly honored. And that was the trouble—the barrier in the way of the men who had evolved the great plan and was work-

ing upon it. It would look as if they were asking a good deal of a man who held such a position in relation to public life, to right-about-face and go back and run for governor of a state with a few thousand over a half-million population, which didn't occupy the highly important place it does today in the sisterhood of states. But why ask that of him? I believe it was Arthur Ingraham Borman, the war governor and later himself, a United States senator who may have asked that question.

At any rate, Goff was wanted, for if their plan was to be sprung that year, Goff was the only man with whom they had any chance of succeeding with it. He could get the votes in the boxes, and pull through the legislative candidates, or enough to give a Republican majority. And if he would undertake to do that, then it was unanimously agreed that he should be the new senator from West Virginia. That would be no come down, no turning back, no compromising at a probable loss to the honor and dignity of his career as a public man.

While that was at once the strength of the plan worked up, it was at the same time a war of its weakness, as later proved. Just in what proportion it would be difficult to state probably. Goff was acclaimed the nominee in a riot and race of enthusiasm and confidence. And such a campaign! Bonfires, ever before or since like it. Bonfires and torches, wonderful parades and still more marvelous meetings, joint debates between Goff and Wilson (W. L.), the people of the state shaken from center to circumference, by the conflict. Republican victory was in the air. Goff was destined to win. Everybody felt it—and he did win. But he didn't win the legislature. The Republican party was one vote shy. Not very much, but just as good—or as bad—as being short fifty votes. The Democrats with that slight margin used it to make the margin wider. It seated a few men of their party who hadn't been elected, and likewise decided that their candidate who hadn't been elected, had been.

And this is probably how all of that happened. The Republican scheme became known. The Democrats appealed to their scattering ranks to stand by their ticket. They said that if they voted for Goff, they would not be getting him for governor, but they would be getting somebody else, and nobody could tell who, for, under the law then, the president of the state senate would succeed to the governorship, and nobody on earth could foresee who that would be, but it would be some Republican whom Democrats needn't feel like honoring, etc., etc. Goff would be United States senator by reason of Democrat votes cast for him for governor—and more of the same along the same line.

You can readily surmise that that touched off a bombshell in the midst of the Republican brigadiers, as well as in the camp occupied by the excited, enthusiastic hosts of that party. It exploded late in the campaign, but it played such havoc, that it had to be met. There were conferences at which all sorts of schemes to head this discomfiting blow were suggested and outlined. Finally, it was Goff himself who agreed to meet it as it should be met. It was the last thing he desired to do in his heart no doubt, but it seemed the only thing to do. He would make the sacrifice—and he offered up himself with the same heroic patriotism he showed as a boy commander in the army, when he wrote President Lincoln from his prison cell, when he heard that he was held as a hostage for the safety of a Confederate prisoner of equal rank who seemed certain to be executed, that his (Goff's) life was insignificant when compared to the Union cause, and if it would help on the cause no head should be given for his position nor safety. It was but an incident and atom of war.

Goff was willing to take the governorship, and ready to say so, if it would make any surer the success of the scheme of the party leaders. They doubted that it would, or, at least, whether at this late hour, it was necessary to receive such a sacrifice from their gallant leader. They felt assured of success, and felt inclined to believe that what such an announcement would gain on the one hand it would likely lose on the other, and they figured it a standoff whichever way, and victory assured. Whatever the real reasons held individually and collectively which caused the decision, the change in the plans were not made, and in due time came the election with its divided victory, which that Democratic legislature made a whole victory by handing over the governorship to A. B. Fleming, the candidate opposing Goff.

Now you see what might have happened in the politics of West Virginia. Go to it. It is a fine subject for an argument; none better, for there isn't one chance in a billion of finding the correct answer.

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